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# Four Organ Recitals with an Essay: *The Composer's Image: Problems in the Reception of the Organ Music of Camille Saint-Saëns*

by

Stillman James Matheson ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Music

Department of Music

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 1997

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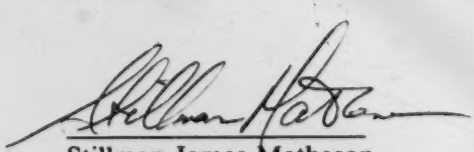

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Four Organ Recitals with an Essay: *The Composer's Image: Problems in the Reception of the Organ Music of Camille Saint-Saëns*" submitted by Stillman James Matheson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Music.

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Leonard Ratzlaff

David Gramit

Jacobus Kloppers

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William Wright

18 April 1997
Date

**Abstract**

Camille Saint-Saëns' prolific compositional output includes twenty-one substantial works for the organ; for a number of reasons they have never found their way into the body of organ compositions often referred to as the "standard repertoire." Although well-known during his lifetime as a composer and a performer, most of Saint-Saëns' creative output was forgotten soon after his death. While the organ works of several of his colleagues and contemporaries have been performed regularly and consistently throughout the twentieth century, all but one or two of those of Saint-Saëns are rarely heard.

This essay is not an analysis or study of the musical content of Saint-Saëns' organ compositions. Rather it is an examination of the various conditions and factors which caused the initial and continuing neglect of these works. These factors include the musical dominance of Germany during most of the nineteenth century, Saint-Saëns failure to acquire the image of a "romantic" composer, personal characteristics which alienated him from many of his contemporaries, and the absence of performers, conductors and concert-organizers who were interested in presenting his music to the public.

It is unlikely that on their own, any one of these factors could have led to the neglect of Saint-Saëns' organ works; other composers faced similar obstacles without suffering this fate. This essay demonstrates that it was the combined effect of a number of negative elements over a period of time that led to neglect; it also shows that the positive reception of works of art by the public involves a great deal more than merely their intrinsic value.

## Foreword

Camille Saint-Saëns is a composer whose music has been described as vulgar, insipid, and lacking in dramatic feeling. With opinions such as these common and widespread, it might seem to make sense to dismiss his organ music and add it to the thousands of compositions which have found their way into the trash-bin over the centuries. Indeed, this was essentially the attitude I encountered in the early days of my study of the organ. I was presented with a variety of repertoire by my teachers, and this included music from the nineteenth century. I was a bit dismayed, however, that the choice of Romantic organ music included very little beyond Felix Mendelssohn and César Franck. Saint-Saëns was conspicuous only by his absence.

I did not hear any of the organ music of Saint-Saëns until I became a graduate student, when I heard a performance of the *Prelude and Fugue in B Major,* Opus 99, no. 2. Until then, I knew Saint-Saëns as the composer of a great symphony which happened to include an organ part, and *Carnival of the Animals*. It was a revelation to learn that he was not only the composer of hundreds of compositions for various instruments and combinations of instruments, but also the composer of a substantial number of organ works. Based on my own experiences as a listener and a player, I concluded that these works must be largely inferior, for I had rarely heard them performed, and they were almost never mentioned in discussions of organ repertoire.

It was not until several years later, when I became a doctoral student, that the music of Saint-Saëns again began to interest me. I had become familiar with

more of his music, and finally asked the question which should have occurred to me some time before: How is it that a composer who could write a piece as powerful as the *Organ Symphony* and a melody as beautiful as *The Swan* could have written twenty-one pieces for the organ so badly that they are almost never heard?

When I finally took the time to listen to the organ music of Saint-Saëns, I became convinced that the neglect of this repertoire had been largely unjust, for in my opinion, it includes a great deal of very good music which is well worth playing. This essay, however, is not about whether or not this is good music, or whether or not this neglect has been justified. Rather, it is an attempt to understand why this music has been largely ignored for the last seventy-five or eighty years. Although there has been nothing as compelling as an organized conspiracy to suppress this music, there have nevertheless been very strong forces at work (which have nothing to do with the quality of the compositions) which have kept these works from becoming part of the organist's standard repertoire. It is important to note that many of the obstacles faced by Saint-Saëns have been faced by other composers without the same disastrous effects, but in Saint-Saëns' case, the combined effect of a variety of negative factors resulted in his becoming perhaps the most underrated organ composer of his time.

There are a number of people who have been very helpful to me in the writing of this essay and in the preparation of the recitals which along with the essay make up my doctoral thesis. Marnie Giesbrecht has been very much appreciated as my teacher and supervisor. I am thankful for her encouragement,

support and wise counsel. I would like to thank David Gramit for sharing his insight and expertise, and for supervising the writing of this essay, as well as the essay which formed part of my lecture recital. I am grateful to the other members of my examining committee for their helpful suggestions and words of advice: John Kernahan, Jacobus Kloppers, Leonard Ratzlaff, and William Wright. I would like to thank Norman Nelson and the University of Alberta Academy Strings for including me in their performance of Poulenc's *Concerto in G Minor for Organ, String Orchestra and Timpani*. A special word of thanks goes to Donna Maskell who has so capably organized, edited and proofread the final version of this essay. Finally, and most importantly, I am grateful to my wife Patricia who has given me unlimited support and encouragement throughout my entire degree program.

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# In Recital

## Stillman Matheson, organist

Candidate for the Doctor of Music degree in organ performance

## Monday, June 28, 1993 at 8:00 pm

### Program

| | |
|---|---|
| Tiento del Cuarto Tono<br>Tiento de Medio Registro de Tiple del Décimo Tono | Francisco Correa de Arauxo<br>(c. 1576-1654) |
| Night Procession from **Organbook II** (1970) | William Albright<br>(b. 1944) |
| Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue (1916) | Healey Willan<br>(1880-1968) |

**Intermission**

| | |
|---|---|
| Toccata and Fugue in F | Johann Sebastian Bach<br>(1685-1750) |
| Variations sur un Noël, Op. 20 (1922) | Marcel Dupré<br>(1886-1971) |

All Saints' Anglican Cathedral
10039 - 103 Street

# Lecture Recital

## Stillman Matheson, organ

**Candidate for the Doctor of Music degree**

**Monday, November 8, 1993 at 8:00 pm**

Premier Livre d'Orgue (1665) — Gillaume-Gabriel Nivers (1632-1714)

- Prélude du premier ton
- Fugue
- Diminution de la basse
- Récit de voix humaine
- Duo
- Récit de cromhorne
- Fugue grave
- Écho
- Plein jeu
- Á deux coeurs

*Text and Subtext in Classical French Organ Music*

Premier Livre d'Orgue (1699) — Nicolas de Grigny (1672-1703)

- Veni Creator, en taille à 5
- Fugue à 5
- Duo
- Récit Cromorne
- Dialogue sur les Grands Jeux

## Convocation Hall, Arts Building

In Recital



## Stillman Matheson, organist

Candidate for the Doctor of Music degree in Organ Performance

**Monday, June 5, 1995 at 8:00 pm**

| | |
|---|---|
| Chaconne in A Minor (1927) | Johann Nepomuk David (1895-1977) |
| Capriccio | Johann Jakob Froberger (1616-1667) |
| Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C | Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) |

**Intermission**

| | |
|---|---|
| Fantaisie in E Flat (1857) | Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) |
| Livre du Saint Sacrement (1984)<br>Prière après la communion<br>Acte de Foi | Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) |
| Prélude et Fugue sur le nom d'Alain, Opus 7 (1943) | Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986) |

Convocation Hall, Arts Building

**Program**

Concerto in B-Flat Major for Harp
and String Orchestra, Op. 4 (1736) — Georg Friedrich Haendel (1685-1759)
Andante allegro
Larghetto
Allegro moderato
Soloist: **Tracy Erdmann**

Concerto in F Major for 3 Violins
and Continuo (1733) — Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)
(Tafelmusik, Part II)
Allegro
Largo
Vivace
Soloists: **Adrian Dyck**
**Mathias Silveira**
**Betsy Steed**

**Intermission**

Concerto in G Minor for Organ,
String Orchestra and Timpani (1939) — Frances Poulenc (1889-1963)
Andante-Allegro-Largo
Soloist: **Stillman Matheson**
Timpani: **Greg Ferguson**

This performance is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Doctor of Music degree for Mr Matheson.

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Department of Music
University of Alberta

# Academy Strings

**Norman Nelson,**
**Conductor**

**November 4, 1995**
**at 8:00 pm**

**All Saints Anglican**
**Cathedral**

When Camille Saint-Saëns died in 1921 at the age of eighty-six, he was one of France's most famous and highly-esteemed musicians. His career as a performer on both the piano and the organ had been wonderfully successful and he had acquired an international reputation throughout Britain, continental Europe, and the United States. He was organist at the prestigious Church of the Madeleine for almost twenty years, and was the recipient of honourary doctorates from both Cambridge and Oxford Universities. He was buried with all the pomp and ceremony due a national hero, and his friend Gabriel Fauré wrote in an obituary: "Would it not be more correct . . . to describe him as the most complete musician we have ever had, with a completeness that we can only find paralleled among the great masters of former days? His unlimited knowledge, his marvellous technique, his clear and exquisite sensibility, his integrity, the variety and astonishing number of his works--do not all these justify his claim to recognition for all time?"[1] The answer to Fauré's second question is "apparently not," for it was not long before most of his multitude of compositions were forgotten, and Reynaldo Hahn, a student of the composer noted that "today it takes courage to admire Saint-Saëns."[2] A French music critic went so far as to write that "he would be delighted to exchange the whole of Saint-Saëns' work for a single page from Bach's *Matthew Passion*."[3] By 1923, only one of his five symphonies was regularly

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[1]Gabriel Fauré, quoted in James Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1965), xii.

[2]Reynaldo Hahn, quoted in ibid.

[3]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle*, xii.

heard, and few of his numerous concertos were ever performed.[4] His organ works had all but disappeared, and "even the French have not been kind to him in their estimates of his legacy."[5]

During the years following his death, this trend toward the neglect of most of his hundreds of works continued. His reputation as a composer continued to deteriorate, and today he is known for only a handful of compositions, including *Danse Macabre, Le Carnaval des Animaux,* and the *Third Symphony.* Even sympathetic biographers find it difficult to bestow on him unqualified praise. In his 1923 biography of Saint-Saëns, Watson Lyle begins by discussing the incredible skill of the composer, calling him a "master whose pre-eminence and genius is revealed by originality in his art," and goes on to compare him to Mozart.[6] Later, however, some of his music is described as "not very far removed from the border line that separates good, healthy music from the blatantly vulgar."[7] In his 1951 survey of nineteenth century French music, Martin Cooper's opinion is at best lukewarm: "His genius was literally superficial, in the sense that it was for the surface of things . . . . In the depths he flounders, keeps his head respectably

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[4]Watson Lyle, *Camille Saint-Saëns: His Life and Art* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., and New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1923; reprint Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 104 and 96.

[5]Elaine Brody, *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope 1870-1925* (New York: George Braziller, 1987), 287.

[6]Lyle, 1.

[7]Ibid., 88.

above water, but that is all."[8] Other writers have made little attempt to conceal their disdain for the music of Saint-Saëns. Norman Demuth wrote that "Saint-Saëns, who, in his lifetime, ranked among the most widely performed and fêted of representative French composers, now counts for absolutely nothing . . . ."[9] He later wrote, with almost vengeful glee that "there is infinitely more human feeling in the classicism of D'Indy than in the neo-classicism of Camille Saint-Saëns." [10]

For organists, the discrediting and neglect of Saint-Saëns' music has been perhaps of more consequence than for players of other instruments. For most instrumentalists, music from the nineteenth century represents a major portion of their repertoire, and "among 'serious' music listeners, the music of the nineteenth century is practically everyone's favourite."[11] There is a long list of Romantic composers whose names are known to everyone. For the organist with a desire to play music from this period, the choices are much more limited. The "golden age" of organ music ended in 1750 with the death of J. S. Bach, and for a variety of reasons the organ was not the instrument of choice for most composers after that time. Beethoven wrote only a few novelty pieces for the instrument, Schubert composed one fugue, and Schumann preferred the pedal piano. Those who did

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[8]Martin Cooper, *French Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), 45.

[9]Norman Demuth, *Vincent d'Indy* (London: Rockliff, 1951; reprint Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 44.

[10]Ibid., 90.

[11]John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer, 1993) xi.

write for the organ did so in a minor way, with their works for the instrument constituting a very small portion of their total output. These include Brahms, who composed two sets of preludes and fugues and eleven short chorale preludes, and Franck and Mendelssohn, who wrote a dozen works each. (The exception is Max Reger, who wrote many works for the organ, most of which are rarely heard.) Saint-Saëns composed a total of twenty-one pieces for the organ, but they are heard less frequently than those by Rheinberger, Guilmant, and Lefébure-Wély, not to mention those by more well-known composers such as Liszt and Mendelssohn. The "rediscovery" of Saint-Saëns organ works could lead to a substantial addition to organists' repertoire, particularly those interested in playing music from the nineteenth century.

Even the most cursory of observations tells us that the creation of a lasting work of musical art is a venture fraught with dangers and pitfalls. When it is new, the composition runs the risk of being too original, of existing outside the listeners' (and performers') musical frames of reference, and soon gets placed on the shelf, perhaps forever. If it is not original enough, the composer is criticized for having nothing new to say, and the composition is soon pushed aside in favour of the more novel. Some pieces of music are initially successful, but remain popular for only a few years. Others take decades before a seemingly fickle public considers them worthy of its attention. Conventional wisdom tells us that of the thousands of compositions produced at any given time, the vast majority will not outlive their creators because they do not possess the elements necessary to give

them that quality of "timelessness" which we associate with "serious" art. There are of course some noteable exceptions, the most famous of which are the compositions of J. S. Bach, which were overshadowed by those of G. P. Telemann during the composers' lifetimes, but which have come to be known as the best and most representative works of their time. Beethoven's final string quartets, too, had trouble finding an audience initially, but are now generally considered to be genuine masterpieces.

In the case of Saint-Saëns, there are indications that there may be at least a modest reversal in the fate of his compositions. In a 1982 review of a new (and rare) recording of his organ works entitled "Saint-Saëns' Organ Music: A Case of Unjust Neglect," Allen Hughes writes that "this album is something of a revelation. While it does not prove Saint-Saëns to have been a genius composer for the organ, it does reveal him to have written more interestingly and effectively for the instrument than the virtual abandonment of his works by organists decades ago would have led one to believe."[12] In a similar vein, Michael Stegemann writes that "over the years that I have devoted to the study of Saint-Saëns, I have repeatedly felt that the current estimation of the composer is in dire need of revision," and he believes that the composer made a contribution of "outstanding

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[12]Allen Hughes, "Saint-Saëns' Organ Music: A Case of Unjust Neglect," *The New York Times,* 7 February 1982.

significance to the Romantic era."[13]

Whether or not Saint-Saëns' music deserves a place in the standard repertoire of organists and other musicians is not a question that will be answered here. In fact, an attempt to do so would be futile. However, what can be done is to consider some of the possible reasons why his music suffered such a serious and rapid decline during the earlier part of this century. This may not convince organists to play the works of Saint-Saëns any more than they do now, but it could allow us to make more informed judgements of this large body of music for the organ.

Many recent studies in the history of music have been concerned with myriads of complex relationships among compositions, composers, audiences, critics, and society in general. The consideration of a work of art as a concrete entity existing in a vacuum with inherent value and meaning, or lacking these elements, has in many cases been replaced by the viewpoint that a piece of music can only be evaluated and understood by studying at the same time both the music and the environment in which it exists. As a basis for this study, three articles are used which indirectly shed light on the answers to the "Saint-Saëns question" as stated above: "A. B. Marx, Berlin Concert Life, and German National Identity" by Sanna Pederson, "Constructing a Victorian Schubert: Music, Biography, and Cultural Values" by David Gramit, and "Beethoven as Secular

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[13]Michael Stegemann, *Camille Saint-Saëns and the French Solo Concerto from 1850 to 1920,* trans. Ann C. Sherwin (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1991), 17 and 19.

Humanist: Ideology and the Ninth Symphony in Nineteenth-Century Criticism" by Ruth A. Solie. It will be illustrated that the failure of Saint-Saëns' organ music to become standard repertoire can be ascribed to the cumulative effect of nationalism, personal traits, and the politics of French organ culture.

**The Dominance of Germany**

It is telling that the three articles chosen to aid in a study of Camille Saint-Saëns are all concerned with the music of German composers. The reason for this is not difficult to discern, for by the end of the nineteenth century, it was clear that the dominant musical forces in the world were German. German music had become what Pederson terms "the paradigm of absolute music in the nineteenth century."[14] This in itself is of primary importance, but equally important are the conditions which allowed this to happen, and the process by which it came about. Sanna Pederson explains how during the first half of the nineteenth century a number of writers and music critics, chiefly A. B. Marx, made a concerted effort to rid their society of foreign musical influences, while at the same time they promoted the efforts of their native composers. Beginning in 1824, Marx was for seven years the editor of the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, and he used this position to promote his outlook on the world which in part reflected Hegel's theory of "World History":

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[14]Sanna Pederson, "A. B. Marx, Berlin Concert Life, and German National Identity," *19th-Century Music*, no. XVIII/2 (Fall 1994): 89.

> In "World History," Hegel described how the world spirit progressed through increasingly higher states of consciousness, which were not represented by individuals, but by the spirits of different peoples, communities, or nations. Each stage of the progress of the spirit favored a given nation whose people during that time would function as center and focus of world history--as had occurred most powerfully and immediately with the French Revolution. In Hegel's view, after the struggle for absolute freedom had been articulated in France, the world spirit had moved on to Prussia, whose government and society, he believed, would come to embody the world spirit more perfectly.[15]

In Hegel's opinion, and Marx's as well, Germany's time had come.

The first opponent facing Marx in his battle for German supremacy was the opera composer, Gioacchino Rossini, who was the most popular composer in all of Europe during the 1820's. This battle soon went far beyond the boundaries of musical discussion and analysis to the point where "foreign opera was described as nothing less than the enemy invading German lands."[16] Marx's strategies against Rossini, all of which depended on nationalist boundaries, included not only the Hegelian theory of world history discussed above, but also the denunciation of Rossini on aesthetic as well as moral grounds: not only was Rossini's music flawed, listeners were urged to adopt "the morally superior stance of renouncing pleasurable sensations."[17]

Although Rossini was perhaps the most formidable opponent in Marx's struggle toward German domination, it was necessary to discredit the music of

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[15]Ibid., 91.

[16]Ibid., 90.

[17]Ibid.

composers from other countries as well. The French were dismissed as being incapable of truly appreciating music and having a preference for "sensual delight and virtuosic display."[18] Both the French and the English were described as lacking in musical character, and falling behind both the Italians and the Germans in the hierarchy prescribed by the theory of world spirit. This nationalistic appeal was a common theme in Marx's attempts to bolster the reputation of German music. He credited Luigi Spontini with skill as a composer, but clearly stated that he could never be in the same league as German composers, with his mix of French and Italian blood.[19] Another tactic Marx used to further his cause was the promotion of the symphony as treated by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, as a superior and characteristically German genre:

> In 1826 Marx urged the German peoples to listen to Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven not only for the music itself but also for themselves as a nation: "We must be aware of symphonies if we want to recognize our age and ourselves . . . . The more light-minded nations, for example, the French and the Italians, have never produced anything substantial in the entire genre of the symphony--they could never grow to like and understand it; among other things, therefore, they have fallen far behind the Germans, for whom the symphony is characteristic."
>
> Not only was the symphony "characteristic" of the Germans, Marx went so far as to declare that the symphony "could be identified as virtually the exclusive property of the Germans."[20]

At the same time as Marx was promoting the symphony as a particularly

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[18]Ibid., 92.

[19]Ibid., 95 and 96.

[20]Ibid., 96.

German creation and art-form, he called for repeated performances of a limited number of works which he considered worthy of such exposure. The implementation of this request was successful on two fronts: it made listeners familiar with the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven which were being presented as representative of a specifically German culture, and it led to the exclusion of works which were considered inferior, mainly those of foreign countries where symphonies were rarely produced anyway. By 1830, when Marx quit his job as editor, "the institution of the symphony concert had been secured to support the commemoration of an established repertory of pieces embodying German national identity."[21]

On its own, Marx's success in his own country in establishing the German symphony as the highest form of musical art would not necessarily have been an enormous obstacle for Saint-Saëns, and to some extent it was not. As a performer, Saint-Saëns enjoyed many successes in Germany, and some of his compositions were highly acclaimed there. In fact, in 1877 *Samson et Dalila* was premiered in Weimar and repeated successfully in Hamburg, Cologne, and Dresden long before it was ever staged in Saint-Saëns' own country. But with German symphonic music, and later Wagnerian music drama which drew on that tradition of high seriousness, firmly established as the epitome of musical art, Saint-Saëns' country of origin surely never was forgotten. The case of Spontini, an Italian who successfully lived and worked in Germany, illustrates that foreign musicians were

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[21]Ibid., 107

welcome to perform and have their works performed there, but they could never hope to receive full acceptance by Marx and other influential members of the musical *intelligentia.* The difficulty lay in the fact that to a great extent the French (not to mention the English, the Americans, and others) "bought into" much of what A. B. Marx had to say: "In the 1830's under the influence of the romanticists, Beethoven became a cult in artistic and fashionable society. Under Habeneck the Beethoven symphonies were so frequently performed that it seemed almost as if the *Concerts du Conservatoire* had been specially founded in 1828 for that purpose."[22] Before long, "the Beethoven myth helped to generate the perception, continent-wide by the end of the century, that serious music in a very real sense *was* German music."[23] At home, Saint-Saëns had to contend with the same preconceived notion which prevailed in Germany, that owing to the way in which world history had progressed, French music could never aspire to being anything more than second-rate. The fact that German music had become dominant in practically all musical genres, including piano music, chamber music, and art-song, strengthened this perception.

This fascination with German music continued for much of the century, and was intensified with the appearance of Richard Wagner, who joined Beethoven on

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[22]Arthur Ware Locke, Music and the Romantic Movement in France (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1920), 78.

[23]Ruth A. Solie, "Beethoven as Secular Humanist: Ideology and the Ninth Symphony in 19th-Century Criticism" in *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Leonard B. Meyer* (Stuyvesant PA: Pendragon Press, 1988), 5.

the level of a cult leader around mid-century. Wagner did not promote the symphony, but transformed opera into music drama which became the embodiment of German culture, history, and aspirations. The progressive chromatic harmony of *Tristan* was emulated by composers both inside and outside Germany. Unfortunately, most French composers who tried to emulate him only compromised their own musical heritage with less than satisfactory results and according to James Harding,

> the effect of Wagner on French music was wholly disastrous. The composers who fell under his thrall presented a sad spectacle as they bemused themselves with legendary heroes and clogged their orchestration with indigestible Wagnerian techniques. Among the most pathetic was that jovial creature Emmanuel Chabrier, the very incarnation of *gauloiserie*. In Bayreuth for *Tristan and Isolde*, he sobbed ecstatically: "I've waited ten years to hear that A on the cellos!" and forthwith tortured his Southern genius into the composition of a flatulent Wagnerian opera called *Gwendoline*. Like the composer of *Espana,* Edouard Lalo succumbed also to the German master and spent the rest of his life wondering where he had gone wrong.[24]

Saint-Saëns too had been an early supporter of Wagner, but during the latter part of the century he began to resent the foreign musical domination of France and his work toward the promotion of French music led him into conflict with both the Germans and the French Wagnerites:

> Not so very long ago a French composer who was daring enough to venture on to the terrain of instrumental music had no other means of getting his work performed than to give a concert himself and invite his friends and the critics. As for the general public it was hopeless even to think about them. The name of a composer who was French and was still alive had only to appear on a poster to frighten everybody away. The chamber music societies . . . restricted their programmes to the resplendent names of Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn--and sometimes Schumann as proof

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[24]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 146.

of their audacity.[25]

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 intensified his dislike for the Germans and he became outspoken in his aversion to the works of Wagner. In 1886 when he went to Berlin (where sixty years previous A. B. Marx had been preaching German superiority) it was clear the press had turned against him. It was reported that Saint-Saëns hated German music, and had offended the German people by his public statements to that effect. His reception was not positive, and it was reported that "when the French composer Saint-Saëns appeared in the philharmonic concert, expressions of disapproval issued from the audience. The weak applause that greeted the guest aroused opposition, which was manifested again at a place in the piano concerto that was reminiscent of Wagner . . . ."[26] Another description of the same event presents a stronger impression of the composer's poor reception: "The opinions on Wagner . . . were received with anger in Germany. At Berlin, where he had been engaged for a series of concerts, a storm of insults and whistles greeted his appearance on the platform and the police had trouble in restraining the furious audience while he played . . . ."[27] His standing in Germany was never completely restored, and during the First World War the break with that country became complete, when

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[25]Camille Saint-Saëns, quoted in ibid., 109.

[26]*Neue Musik-Zeitung* 7, no. 3 (February 1886): 37; quoted in Michael Stegemann, *Camille Saint-Saëns and the French Solo Concerto from 1850 to 1920,* trans. Ann C. Sherwin (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1991), 41.

[27]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle*, 146.

> he experienced for the second time in his life the anguish of seeing his country being invaded by German troops. Having been one of the first to warn Frenchmen about the political significance of Wagner, he now revived the campaign with a series of articles in the "Echo de Paris" calling for the total suppression of all German music for the duration. Although he carefully avoided personal insult his opponents were less restrained, and the controversy soon developed on traditional French lines with charges and counter-charges of treason, pederasty and eunuchry, while Saint-Saëns himself was variously accused of being a Jew and the son of a Catholic priest.[28]

Saint-Saëns had become a *persona non grata* in the country which had established itself as the flagship society of musical romanticism, and had convinced everyone else that this was so.

**César Franck and Vincent D'Indy**

At the end of the Franco-Prussian War, Saint-Saëns took practical measures to implement some of his ideas about freeing French music from German domination. Similar developments were going on in various parts of the world and Germany's political aspirations helped to solidify feelings of nationalism in Eastern Europe, Russia, and later in England. Native composers often benefitted from this as the public became uneasy about this potential German threat. Musical domination had been tolerated and even welcomed, but threats to home and hearth were another matter altogether. Saint-Saëns reacted by helping to found the *Société Nationale de Musique*, an organization with a mandate to stage performances of new French compositions. Over the next ten or fifteen years, the

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[28]Ibid., 216.

animosity toward the German people which had been created by the Franco-Prussian War faded a bit, and many members of the *Société* resumed their former allegiance to Richard Wagner. This was not the case with Saint-Saëns, however, and he now found himself outside the circle of an influential group of musicians who considered César Franck to be their spiritual leader and mentor.

At first glance, Franck seems an unlikely choice for this position. A shy, retiring man, he was known throughout most of his life as a gifted church organist whose compositions, spiced with Wagnerian chromaticism, met with only limited success. He had a large group of private pupils, however, whose devotion to him was extreme. Vincent D'Indy's biography of Franck has numerous references to him such as the following:

> For the entire generation that was so fortunate to be brought up on his sane and solid principles, César Franck was not merely a far-seeing and lucid teacher, but a *father*--and I have no hesitation in using this word to characterise the man who gave birth to the French symphonic school, for we, his pupils, together with many artists who came in contact with him, were drawn instinctively by a unanimous, but independent, agreement to call him "Father Franck."[29]

D'Indy was convinced that his teacher was the true successor of Beethoven,[30] and never tires of comparing the two composers. It was D'Indy and his fellow Franckists who were to a great extent responsible for the creation of Franck's

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[29]Vincent D'Indy, *César Franck*, trans. Rosa Newmarch (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1909), 235.

[30]Ibid., 29.

"somewhat inflated posthumous reputation."[31]

> By the end of the decade [the 1890's] a brilliant parade of young performers was entering the organ profession . . . . All had studied organ with Franck...all held important organ positions by 1900 . . . . On April 28, 1898, Albert Mahaut gave a program of Franck works in the Trocadero . . . . This performance was the first one dedicated to Franck's organ works since his death. From that time Mahaut continued to be a leading advocate of Franck's organ music, playing it on tour as well as in Paris. Between 1905 and 1923 he played more than a hundred Franck recitals in various cities of France, Algeria, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, and England.[32]

From that time onward, the position of Franck's organ works in the standard repertoire was secure, and Franck has come to be considered the leading French Romantic composer of organ music, with any contenders for the position in a distant second place.

Saint-Saëns' troubles with the "Franck Circle" began around the mid-1880's. With D'Indy as their leader, this group of young composers had decided that Saint-Saëns' opposition to Wagner made him unsuitable to be head of the *Société National,* and D'Indy created a situation in which Saint-Saëns was forced to resign.[33] This was not the end of Saint-Saëns' disputes with D'Indy, however, for he had committed "the unforgiveable offence of disliking Franck."[34] Ironically, Saint-Saëns had had cordial relations with the elder composer for many years, had

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[31]Laurence Davies, *César Franck and His Circle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), 5.

[32]Orpha Ochse, *Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 106.

[33]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 174.

[34]Ibid.

often performed Franck's works at the *Société* concerts, and it is likely that it was Saint-Saëns who was responsible for Franck's appointment as organ professor at the Paris Conservatory.[35] But Saint-Saëns was never known for his congeniality, and on several occasions did or said things which raised the hackles of D'Indy and the other Franckists. At the first performance of Franck's Piano Quintet (which incidentally was dedicated to Saint-Saëns) in 1880, Saint-Saëns himself performed the piano part. It is reported that "at the end of the work, he stalked off the platform in a fit of nervous exasperation and left the manuscript with its dedication lying on the piano."[36] Saint-Saëns was known for making enemies, both personal and professional, but perhaps the worst thing he could have done for his own reputation was to alienate D'Indy, and the easiest way to do that was to denigrate the music of Franck. It is not difficult to discern the German influence in Franck's writing and this along with the increasing popularity of his works may have caused the irascible Saint-Saëns to adopt an anti-Franck viewpoint. In any case, the following comments from the composer's pen appeared in a publication of 1919:

> We may wonder at the inordinate height of the pedestal upon which he [D'Indy] has erected the statue of César Franck, the "gifted continuer of the great symphonist, the greatest creator of musical forms along with Beethoven and Wagner." . . . though I highly esteem his works and endeavour to get them appreciated at their true value, I have never gone so far as to set them on a level with those of the great masters of music; they lack too many

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[35]Davies, 203.

[36]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 174.

> qualities for that distinction . . . . In his works we do not find that latent warmth, that irresistible charm which makes us forget everything and transports us into unknown realms.[37]

He then goes on to list specific instances of technical and musical shortcomings in the works of Franck.

Saint-Saëns' disputes with D'Indy were not limited to affronts to Franck's musical integrity, however. D'Indy was the author of a volume entitled *Cours de Composition Musicale.* Saint-Saëns was highly critical of it in his essay, "Les Idées de Monsieur Vincent D'Indy." His first complaint was that D'Indy's ideas were not his own, but rather those of the German, Hugo Riemann. He accused the author of "crossing the Rhine in our search after truth"[38] and went on to refute numerous specific musical concepts in D'Indy's publication. In keeping with the prosodic style of the time, Saint-Saëns alternates lavish but empty praise with apologetic but pointed criticism, writing that "so important and conscientious a work as this *Course of Musical Composition* frequently deserves admiration, and sympathy above everything else . . . . Before leaving the fugue I cannot help remarking that this part of the *Course* appears to me calculated rather to show the pupil how others have written fugues than to teach him to write them himself. In this connection it is my opinion that Cherubini's time-honored treatise might be put to

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[37]Camille Saint-Saëns, *Outspoken Essays on Music,* trans. Fred Rothwell (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922; reprint Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 46.

[38]Ibid., 9.

more profitable use."[39]

Any chance of a reconciliation with D'Indy disappeared with the so-called "Rust Affair." Wilhelm Friedrich Rust (1739-1796) was an obscure composer of instrumental sonatas whom D'Indy "discovered" and whose music he championed, regarding him as the immediate precursor of Beethoven.[40] Saint-Saëns believed the compositions to be of questionable authenticity and perhaps had been "waiting for an excuse to challenge D'Indy for a long time."[41] On this matter Saint-Saëns wrote:

> M. D'Indy has a high opinion of the sonatas of W. F. Rust, upon which he dwells at length, regarding them as superior to those of Haydn and Mozart. It would be wise to proceed warily as regards Rust's compositions, concerning the authenticity of which there has been much dispute. These sonatas have been considerably altered. Probably M. D'Indy was not aware that musical "faking" is a common practice in Germany . . . . Rust's grandson has protested against the authenticity of the sonatas, but to no purpose; M. D'Indy had caught his great composer and was unwilling to let him go.[42]

Finally, it must be noted that Saint-Saëns was "out of sympathy with the developments of French music after 1890" and became "personally embittered and intransigently hostile to the younger generation."[43] He was particularly hostile toward the music of Claude Debussy, and as a member of the Prix de Rome

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[39]Ibid., 40.

[40]Demuth, 51.

[41]Davies, 307.

[42]Saint-Saëns, 45.

[43]Cooper, 109.

committee of 1884, "it is thought that Saint-Saëns played a part in drawing up the official report which harshly comdemned it."[44] The feelings of animosity were mutual, and Debussy "abominated" Saint-Saëns for what he perceived as his music based on intellect rather than emotion.[45] By the end of his life, Saint-Saëns had become estranged from not only the Germans, but from many influential Frenchmen as well.

**The Creation of an Image**

Upon initial consideration, it seems almost frivolous to suggest that the success of a composer of "serious" music can be to any substantial extent dependent on his public image as a person. But in David Gramit's "Constructing a Victorian Schubert: Music, Biography, and Cultural Values," the author clearly demonstrates that this can indeed be the case. Gramit begins by postulating that during the early and mid-nineteenth century, not only were audiences presented with a limited number of musical works which had been allowed into the "canon of masterworks," but they were also conditioned to hear these works in a particular way. A large part of this conditioning was associated with the name of the composer, which "oriented listeners' expectations before a note sounded."[46]

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[44]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 166.

[45]Wilfred Mellers, *Romanticism and the 20th Century* (London: Rockliff, 1957), 135.

[46]David Gramit, "Constructing a Victorian Schubert: Music, Biography, and Cultural Values," *19th Century Music* 17 (1993): 65 and 66.

The status of the composer, then, had a great influence on how listeners "received" musical performances, and whether their responses would be positive or negative, for to a great extent musical evaluations and personal evaluations of the composer went hand in hand. Gramit's article deals specifically with the case of Franz Schubert, who was not readily accepted in the late nineteenth century as one of the Great Masters. Schubert apparently exhibited a number of personal characteristics which potentially could have prevented his entry into this esteemed company. The first problem was Schubert's association with the *lied*, which was considered to be a particularly feminine art form. The next problem concerned his supposed method of composition:

> The crucial quality, which could lend legitimacy to music despite its associations with femininity and frivolity, was technical and intellectual mastery, especially if gained through industrious study and unceasing self-criticism and revision . . . . By such standards, however, Schubert scarcely provided promising material for a Great Master of Music. His reputation for rapid, unrevised composition suggested laziness, or at best a dubious degree of craftsmanship . . . .[47]

Finally, the image of his lower-class upbringing was something the Victorians could not easily accept.

The first comprehensive biography of Schubert to appear in England pointed to the future in its attempts to downplay and/or reinterpret the perceived negative aspects of the composer's background and character. In it, "childish näiveté and impracticality occur in the midst of a series whose more emphatic opening and closing positions are reserved for traits less likely to receive unfavorable

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[47]Ibid., 69.

interpretation, and the list concludes with a reminder of Schubert's non-English origin, an implied explanation for behavior not meeting English norms."[48] In another early biography, "the German-born Wagnerite Franz Hueffer . . . accounted for Schubert's activity as a songwriter within a developmental scheme that made the song a lyric counterpart to Wagnerian music drama, a frame of reference that enabled him to pass over the problematic character issues entirely."[49] George Grove was already a supporter of Schubert when his biography of the composer was published in 1882 and his bias, as revealed in his attempts to create an acceptable image for Schubert, is perhaps even more pronounced than that of the earlier English writers.[50] Rather than avoid the issue of misplaced femininity in Schubert, he faces the subject head-on, and presents it as a positive aspect of the composer's "affectionate, tender, suffering personality." In dealing with Schubert's lower-class background, Grove is perhaps more subtle, but clearly tries to present Schubert as a man of "inner nobility despite lack of aristocratic refinement."[51] As Gramit explains, the image of Schubert presented by George Grove has endured despite some opposition, and "the Victorian Schubert is still with us."[52]

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[48]Ibid., 69.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid., 72.

[51]Ibid., 74.

[52]Ibid., 78.

In Ruth A. Solie's article, "Beethoven as Secular Humanist: Ideology and the Ninth Symphony in Nineteenth-Century Criticism," the subject of image is discussed in some detail, and there is no doubt about its importance in relation to Beethoven's popularity with nineteenth century audiences:

> He was created "a complete hero, granted a discourse (rare for a musician), a legend (a good source of anecdotes), an iconography, a race (that of the Titans of art: Michelangelo, Balzac), and a fatal flaw (deafness in one who created for the ear's pleasure)." The names "Titan" and "Prometheus" are rampant in the literature about him, granting him mythic status later on; godlike images abound, in a confused hodgepodge of pagan and Christian references that represents Romanticism in distilled form. A mere decade after the composer's death, Robert Schumann heard in the Adagio of the Ninth the heavens opening "to receive Beethoven like a soaring saint . . . ."[53]

The image of a naturally aristocratic, gently masculine Schubert that Grove successfully created for Schubert is in striking contrast to the image that was created for Beethoven. He had achieved the status of sainthood at a time when conventional religion was being seriously questioned, and it was sincerely believed that his music was prophetic, or as Solie put it, "had messages to convey from beyond the grave."[54] Wagner believed Beethoven's symphonies to be "a revelation from another world."[55]

Influential writers and composers created for Beethoven and Schubert public personae which caught the imaginations of their audiences and to a great extent dictated how their works were received. These images are very different from each

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[53]Solie, 4.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid.

other, suggesting perhaps that a single definition of the image of the romantic composer is impossible to formulate. Although common themes emerge, the personal lives and characteristics of the most famous of nineteenth century composers vary a great deal. Saint-Saëns' image has not held him back because there was a specific type of persona associated with the romantic composer, but because what the public saw, and what the image-makers presented, did not fit the more general ideas of what a romantic composer should be.

Saint-Saëns' professional life was marked by success from the very beginning. He was a child prodigy performer on the piano, and was often compared favourably to Mozart, both in this respect and in his ability to compose at incredible speed. He was said to produce music "as an apple tree produces apples."[56] For these gifts he was already in trouble with the Victorians, for as Gramit showed in *Constructing a Victorian Schubert,* industriousness was considered a necessary quality of good composers, and works which were produced with a minimum of effort were of specious value.[57] As a virtuoso organist and pianist, he also drew fire from a certain segment of the French musical establishment. Not only were composers who composed too easily suspect, but performers who displayed great skill with little effort were criticized for their impressive but ephemeral displays, for their mercenary objectives and immoral

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[56]James Harding and Daniel M. Fallon, "Camille Saint-Saëns," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* Vol. 16 ed. Stanley Sadie (London: MacMillan, 1980), 401.

[57]Gramit, 69.

undertones: "Happily our generation no longer knows these meteoric musicians, 'comets of a season,' startling all the capitals of Europe in their dazzling course, firing the fancies and feelings of the fair sex and melting bullion into current coin as they run their romantic career."[58] The image of the romantic composer as one who must suffer in order to produce true works of art is not uncommon; this was part of Beethoven's mystique. It was believed that the tragedy of his deafness and the longing for his "Immortal Beloved" somehow facilitated the creation of works with more meaning and significance. "Only those who have seen extreme pain and suffering will be rewarded on this magnificent scale."[59] In this area, Saint-Saëns was again the loser. From the beginning of his life, he enjoyed every advantage. He was raised by a mother and a great-aunt who doted on him, rather than a tyrannical father who beat him (as was the case with Beethoven) or a father who exploited his prodigious talent (as was the case with Mozart). He never wanted for a job, and he never lacked money. In fact, after serving for twenty years as organist at one of the most prestigious churches in Paris he was able to resign and devote himself entirely to composition and concertizing. César Franck was unlike Saint-Saëns in that he appeared to be "an arduous and determined worker [whose] motive was neither glory, money, nor immediate success. He aimed only

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[58]D'Indy, 35.

[59]Solie, 8.

at expressing his thoughts and feelings by means of his art . . . ."[60]

Also in the area of his domestic life is there little to help build a romantic image of Saint-Saëns. Beethoven's troubles in this regard have done much to elicit sympathy: "The comforts of a home were ever denied to Beethoven, for, more than once disappointed in love, he never married."[61] Franck's wife is often portrayed as a nagging shrew, standing in the way of his creative activities, and making ever more poignant his unrequited love for one of his students. Saint-Saëns, on the other hand, is portrayed as the antagonist in his marriage. When he was almost forty, he rather impulsively decided to get married, and did so to Marie Truffet, the nineteen year old sister of one of his pupils. He was less than an ideal husband, and his spoiled and selfish nature was soon evident:
"The highly-strung composer was thrown into sudden bursts of rage by the draught from an open window or the distraction of an improperly shut drawer, and he was apt to drench her with chilling sarcasms when her youthful inexperience caused the household routine to break down."[62] Eventually the marriage deteriorated completely, and while the couple was on holiday at La Barboule, Saint-Saëns simply vanished. Fifty years later Madame Saint-Saëns recalled that her husband had "left me three years after [the death of my children] and not very kindly, but

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[60]D'Indy, 65.

[61]Percy A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. John Owen Ward, tenth ed.(London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 93.

[62]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle*, 148.

through some whim which has never been explained to me. I asked people to look for him throughout the countryside . . . and found that he had taken the train for Paris. For several days, ill and deserted, I was left on my own."[63] They never met or spoke to each other again. Historians are undecided on the frequent claim that Saint-Saëns was homosexual, ("there are also amusing stories that once in Algiers Saint-Saëns gaily donned a pink dress to receive the Archbishop of Carthage in a manner befitting his red robe, and that he indulged in Gide-like orgies with Arab boys and fellaheen"[64]) but if he were, that could explain his desire to end his marriage, and would have been another obstacle in the creation of an acceptable image, at a time when homosexuality was considered both immoral and socially unacceptable, and when the image of a strong, god-like and unfailingly masculine Beethoven overshadowed every composer of the century.

His sarcastic tongue and predilection for making enemies has already been mentioned, but

> as the years went by the only emotion he freely allowed himself to show was that of bad temper. "He was a most irritable man," commented the late Sir Thomas Beechman, who had good cause to know. Respectful young men who leapt to their feet to offer the aged *Maître* their comfortable seats were met with a brisk "Foutez-moi le camp!" and soldiers in the trenches who sent him their compositions got them back by return mail with the furious note: "Do I send you my works to look at?"[65]

As if Saint-Saëns did not do enough on his own to help create a negative

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[63]Marie Saint-Saëns, quoted in ibid., 156.

[64]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle*, 202.

[65]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle*, xiii.

public image, his detractors had one more card to play in their efforts to discredit him. As anti-Semitism grew in Germany and other parts of Europe during the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, the rumor began to circulate that Saint-Saëns was of Jewish heritage. There was really nothing to support this, his occupation as an organist in the Roman Catholic Church was well-known, and in none of his many publications of essays did Saint-Saëns ever mention being Jewish, even in "Memories of my Childhood," which discusses his ancestry and heritage. Despite this, a 1914 biographical sketch of the composer published in England states plainly that "he is a French Jew, born in 1835,"[66] and as recently as 1970, it was written that Saint-Saëns was "deeply proud of his Jewishness."[67] As with most rumors, the origin of this one seems to be unknown, but Saint-Saëns' public anti-Wagner and anti-German sentiments made him a target for anyone who did not share his views. D'Indy and many in his circle did little to hide their anti-Semitic views. In a discussion of the progression of music history in the various countries of Europe, he described France at one point as "caught in the toils of the Judaic school of opera."[68] He also went to great lengths to describe Franck's unstinting devotion to Christianity, as a way of convincing the world of his mentor's great virtue, while at the same time

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[66]J. Cuthbert Hadden, *Modern Musicians: A Book for Players Singers and Listeners* (London & Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1914), 24.

[67]Davies, 8.

[68]D'Indy, 86.

highlighting the contrast with anyone who is non-Christian, famous, or financially successful:

> Franck was undoubtedly a believer, like Palestrina, Bach, or Beethoven before him; confident in a life to come, he would not lower his art for the sake of fame in this one; he had the ingenuous sincerity of genius. Therefore, while the ephemeral reknown of many artists who only regarded their work as a means of acquiring fortune or success begins already to fall into the shadow of oblivion, never to emerge, the seraphic personality of "Father" Franck, who worked for Art alone, soars higher and higher into the light . . . .[69]

In reality, Saint-Saëns was not a Jew, but neither was he particularly Christian. In an essay entitled "Problèmes et Mystères," he demonstrated his lack of faith in traditional religion when he wrote that "the joys which nature gives to us . . . , the discovery of new truths, the enjoyment of art, the spectacle of suffering eased . . . , all these are enough for the happiness of life."[70] His disillusionment with Christianity was not enough to harm Saint-Saëns' image, for this was an age when the questioning of conventional religious beliefs was accepted and even encouraged. But Saint-Saëns went beyond that, stating his beliefs that life has no purpose and that beyond nature, "everything else is madness and illusion."[71] Many who had turned their backs on Christianity had replaced it with a more humanist form of spirituality without going as far as Saint-Saëns and denouncing metaphysics altogether. One of the central points of Solie's

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[69]Ibid., 69.

[70]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 190.

[71]Ibid.

article is that during the nineteenth century, Beethoven was elevated to "the domain of the seer and the prophet; when in unison with all genuine mystics and ethical teachers, he delivers a message of religious love and resignation-of identification with the sufferings of all living creatures, deprecation of self, negation of personality, release from the world."[72]

The perception of Beethoven as a mystic or even a religious leader created an image for him which many other composers of the nineteenth century found difficult to live up to. It was certainly not an image that could be created for Saint-Saëns, with his atheistic and at times anti-humanitarian views.

Ruth Solie explains that not only is the image of the composer of primary importance in the positive reception of works, but also that particular works can have their status enhanced in similar ways. She uses Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as an example.[73] As Schubert's image in Victorian England went from negative to positive, so were the perceived weaknesses of this symphony reinterpreted to become strengths. At first, its great length was "a never-failing cause of complaint," but before long, "the size of the Ninth took on a different connotation, giving it the lineaments of monumentality and making it appear prophetic."[74] Another feature that aided in the acceptance of this work was its chronological position as one of Beethoven's last compositions. Having been

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[72]Solie, 4.

[73]Ibid., 6.

[74]Ibid.

composed so close to the end of the composer's life, it assumed the almost transcendent character ascribed to works written near a composer's death.[75] The great complexity of the piece, which at first made it difficult for audiences to relate to and analysts to comprehend, was seen later as a sign of its greatness. Before long, those "deeply committed to the mystification of the symphony, [the] Wagnerians, Romantic idealists, American transcendentalists, and those inclined to radical politics" formulated ideas which distinguished between music as "art" and music as "entertainment." Beethoven's Ninth clearly fit into the former category, and as such its difficulty became "an important mark of distinction."[76] The words of a London writer illustrate well how the inability to understand can inspire awe and respect rather than frustration and rejection: "Then came the last movement, about which I stay my pen. I did not understand it, and reverently stand in hope and faith, that its secrets may at some future day be revealed to me."[77]

As "Beethoven and his masterpiece gradually came to represent not only German music as a whole, but the spirit of the nineteenth century as well,"[78] any composer of symphonies who followed him ran the risk of having his works compared to this monumental and exemplary piece of music. As much as any

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[75]Ibid., 7

[76]Ibid., 9.

[77]Quoted in ibid., 10.

[78]Solie, 12.

work of the nineteenth century, this final symphony of Beethoven had imposed on it a number of extra-musical associations, ranging from a musical presentation of "the whole first chapter of the Pentateuch" to an autobiography of the composer.[79] Programmatic elements in music became the norm for much of the century after the time of Beethoven, and if the composer did not have them in mind at the time of composition, the composer or someone else would apply them after the fact. The detailed programme which accompanied the first performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* is one example of this practice. Solie sums up well what nineteenth century audiences came to expect from a piece of music: "Interpretive traditions such as these grew up during the nineteenth century because the pervasive spirit of Romantic and idealistic aesthetic philosophies suggested that works of art bore hidden messages for the conduct of human life."[80] The music which Saint-Saëns produced was in many ways as out of step with the prevailing notions of art and Romanticism as was the composer himself. In "Art for Art's Sake," Saint-Saëns asks the question "Why should we demand that Art be useful or moral?"[81] He goes on to make explicit his views on the role of music and other art forms, claiming that art is "sufficient unto itself" and that "in its self-sufficiency lies its heights of greatness."[82] On the subject of meaning and

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[79]Ibid., 16

[80]Ibid., 24.

[81]Saint-Saëns, *Outspoken Essays on Music,* 80.

expression in music, Saint-Saëns writes that

> The first prelude of Sebastian Bach's *Wohltemperirte Klavier* expresses nothing, and yet that is one of the marvels of music. The Venus de Milo expresses nothing, and it is one of the marvels of sculpture . . . . Just as morality has no function to be artistic, so Art has nothing to do with morality. Both have their own functions, and each is useful in its own way. The final aim of morality is morality; of art, art, and nothing else.[83]

Saint-Saëns' tastes in performing were more classical than they were romantic, a quality favoured by some and rejected by others:

> His technique was extremely brilliant, clear in the finest details, rich in colors, wonderfully refreshing in rhythmic life, elegant and graceful, yet always virile, absolutely free from sentimentality and an excess of rubato, which so many modern virtuosi seem to hold indispensable for an exhibition of "taste or feeling" . . . .[84]

> Jacques Durand's memory of his "impeccable playing, flawless, pearly touch and amazing virtuosity, but an interpretation devoid of romanticism is echoed by Claudio Arrau: "The most even scales you can imagine, and great power in the fingers. Ice cold, but amazing" . . . . His improvisations were marked by that same objectivity which "appealed more to the senses and that is why, undoubtedly, all emotion was voluntarily excluded."[85]

> The attack . . . was concentrated upon his lack of those mannerisms which the more flamboyant virtuosi employ to heighten the drama of the occasion and to warm up the groundlings. Saint-Saëns' platform manner was frigidness itself . . . . Some said his playing was too correct, others that it was too arid.[86]

At a time when romantic performance was defined by a great deal of rubato,

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[82]Ibid., 81

[83]Ibid.

[84]Louis Kelterborn, "A Few Reminiscences of Camille Saint-Saëns," *The Musician* (May 1906), 250, quoted in Rollin Smith, *Saint-Saëns and the Organ* (Stuyvesant NY: Pendragon Press, 1992), 121.

[85]Smith, 187.

[86]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 89.

personal interpretation, and the expression of emotion, Saint-Saëns' playing was quite out of step with the prevalent practice of the time. He soon earned the reputation of being a "severe" musician, both as performer and composer, for "those whose playing was characterized as 'severe' . . . played more fugues than storms."[87] Saint-Saëns himself wrote that "there was a tradition that I was a severe, austere musician. The public was led to believe that I played nothing but fugues. So current was this belief that a young woman about to be married begged me to play no fugues at her wedding!"[88] French organists of the time were generally judged by their skills as improvisers as much as by their ability to play the music of other composers, so opinions of their playing were easily transferred to their activities as composers. This led one of Saint-Saëns' critics to write that "he has not convinced us in the slightest that he is destined by God to compose music."[89]

**Clichés and Myths**

In a discussion of clichés and how they relate to reception history, Carl Dahlhaus provides some insight that may help account for the relative failure of most of Saint-Saëns' compositions, particularly those for the organ, to find their way into the "standard repertoire." Dahlhaus writes that "the reception history of

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[87]Smith, 71.

[88]Camille Saint-Saëns, *Musical Memories,* trans. Edwin Gile Rich (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 107.

[89]Pietro Scudo, quoted in Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 89.

works of music is determined in no small measure by the emergence of fixed, perpetually recurring clichés."[90] He goes on to explain that often these stereotyped opinions can function as negatives or positives, depending on the light in which they are presented, and how skillfully the user manipulates them in order to disseminate his opinions:

> One of the ineradicable clichés of Mahler criticism, his juxtaposition of "sublimity" and "banality," has been intrepreted by polemicists to mean that Mahler was unable to realise his intentions properly, and by apologists to mean that he was indifferent to his thematic material as opposed to the function it serves within the form; it has even been taken to mean that he "rescued inferior music" and represents an "aesthetic prefiguration of the future reconciliation of society."[91]

Most of the clichés about Saint-Saëns which have circulated for the last hundred years or so have been less ambiguous in their comments on the works of the composer. Some of these clichés derive from the differences in musical style which are associated with nationality. The "French style" is set up in opposition to the "German style," and in an age when German dominance was already well-established, any composer's works associated too closely with the former were bound to suffer from lack of recognition.

> If the concept of a "French tradition" has any meaning, it describes something of the cool, poised classical quality, essentially Latinate, which is reinstated in the music of Fauré, and later of Ravel . . . its subjective emotional qualities are harnessed by the lucidity of its forms. There is above all an explicit rejection of the excessive emotionalism which these composers identified with

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[90]Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History,* trans. J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 162.

[91]Ibid. 163.

German late Romanticism.[92]

A similar sentiment, but with a much more negative slant, has been expressed in this way: "French music is not generally popular in England, for it lacks the quality which most endears any work to the public. It lacks, that is to say, a strongly flavoured emotional content, either moral or uplifting as in Beethoven or introvert and lowering as in Tschaikowsky."[93] It is not surprising that Saint-Saëns has come to be associated with this French tradition, but the judgements of his music which emphasize the lack of emotion due to its national heritage usually imply or even explicitly state that it is of inferior quality. Because he "embodied in his works many of the essential French qualities,"[94] his music came to be regarded as "intellectual . . . rather than obviously emotional."[95] This emphasis on the "head" rather than "heart" in descriptions of his music can be seen in numerous references to his works:

> He enveloped his innermost feelings in a carapace and imposed an iron check on any display of emotion.[96]
>
> He did not believe in wearing his heart on his sleeve.[97]

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[92]Jim Samson, "Music and Society," *The Late Romantic Era: from the Mid-19th Century to WWI* ed. Jim Samson, (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 36.

[93]Cooper, 1.

[94]Harding and Fallon, 400.

[95]Edward Burlingame Hill, *Modern French Music* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), 7.

[96]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 181.

[97]Ibid., 211.

[In his music] emotion was not profound.[98]

[His compositions were] insipid and lacking in dramatic feeling.[99]

This cliché about the lack of emotion in his music may have originated with the composer himself, for he wrote that "art is capable of existing apart from the slightest trace of emotion or passion."[100] The widely-held view of César Franck as the French successor to Bach and Beethoven, whose music "was the most obviously responsive to German influence"[101] and who "deflected the interest of a whole generation . . . towards that of emotional expression"[102] could only heighten the degree to which Saint-Saëns' music has been considered stark and devoid of feeling.

Beyond this widely-held belief that Saint-Saëns' music lacked emotion is the cliché that his music is superficial and therefore has nothing of value to say. Again, the references to this alleged shallowness abound:

The general character of this work is superficial . . . .[103]

In some cases his works betray a want of inspiration . . . the themes he

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[98]Cooper, 45.

[99]Ibid., 21.

[100]Saint-Saëns, *Outspoken Essays on Music,* 5.

[101]Samson, 36.

[102]Cooper, 3.

[103]Lyle, 90.

employs may sometimes lack character or distinction . . . .[104]

It cannot be disputed that in his compositions Saint-Saëns lacks depth.[105]

Another cliché concerning Saint-Saëns which came to life early and has persisted is the notion that he was a "stuffy academic" who was more interested in writing in the style of the Classical Period than the Romantic. Again, the composer himself may be responsible for the formulation of this cliché, as his interest in Bach, Mozart, and Rameau was well-known. In his own words, he "ran after the chimera of purity, of style, of perfection of form."[106] As he grew older, he became increasingly disillusioned with modern developments in French and other music, and he was outspoken in his criticism of Debussy, being "much alarmed by Debussy's apparent eccentricity and as it began to find admirers he firmly placed himself among the opposition by attacking at every occasion, either in acrimonious verse or by manoeuvring among his influential colleagues."[107] Debussy retaliated by criticizing Saint-Saëns for being "intellectually knowing" and Teutonic(!)[108] During the early part of the twentieth century the importance of progress was loudly proclaimed, and Saint-Saëns came to be seen as old-fashioned. If, as Pierre

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[104]Arthur Hervey, *Saint-Saëns* (New York: Dodd Mead & Co., 1922, reprint Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 1.

[105]Ernest Hutcheson, *The Literature of the Piano* 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 271.

[106]Camille Saint-Saëns quoted in Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 70.

[107]Harding, *Saint-Saëns and His Circle,* 166.

[108]Mellers, 135.

Boulez claims, "all works are essentially connected with the taste of the age that produced them,"[109] then Saint-Saëns could be accused of being an artist out of touch with the times in which he lived, and by extension, of writing music that lacked relevance and meaning. Unlike Mahler and Franck, the clichés concerning him and his music have rarely been reinterpreted to present his compositions in a positive light, although recent considerations of his work have tended to be more balanced.

**Value and Evaluation**

In "Contingencies of Value," Barbara Herrnstein Smith makes some important points about the perceived worth of literary and other art works, which confirm many of the claims made by Gramit, Solie, and Pederson, and help explain why almost all of Saint-Saëns' organ works and a large majority of his other compositions have lain dormant for so long. She explains that works of art undergo a continuous and ongoing process of evaluation which begins at the very beginning of their existence, with the artist himself. From there, "certain highly specialized and elaborated institutions" impose their value judgements on these works of art, with varying degrees of impact. Of particular importance is the "aesthetic academy"

> which, among other things, develops pedagogic and other acculturative

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[109]Pierre Boulez, *Orientations,* trans. Martin Cooper (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 50.

> mechanisms directed at maintaining at least . . . a subpopulation of the community whose members "appreciate the value" of works of art and literature "as such." That is, by providing them with "necessary backgrounds," teaching them "appropriate skills," "cultivating their interests," and generally "developing their tastes," the academy produces generation after generation of subjects for whom the objects and texts thus labelled do indeed perform the functions thus privileged, thereby ensuring the continuity of mutually defining canonical works, canonical functions, and canonical audiences.[110]

This is of course what A. B. Marx intended when he set about establishing the German symphony as the epitome of musical art, by encouraging repeated performances of acceptable (German) compositions, by the conscious neglect of unacceptable (foreign) compositions, and the explicit condemnation of "inferior" genres (Italian opera). This is also what the students of César Franck intended when they made hyperbolic claims about the music of their teacher and presented performances of his organ music by the hundreds, to the exclusion of organ music by other composers such as Camille Saint-Saëns.

Smith goes on to say that there are "innumerable acts of evaluation performed by those who, as may happen, publish the work, purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, allude to, and imitate it; the more explicit but casual judgements made, debated, and negotiated in informal contexts in the more or less professional activities of scholars, teachers, and academic or journalistic critics . . . ."[111] During the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, compositions for the organ, particularly those in France, generally

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[110]Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 44.

[111]Ibid., 45.

suffered from neglect for a variety of reasons, so for works of this sort to have a chance at longevity, a positive beginning was very important. A great deal of exposure was important, and many organists, including Franck, performed their own compositions frequently. Saint-Saëns tended to perform works of Bach, Mendelssohn, and his contemporaries. Perhaps more damaging, however, are lukewarm reviews of new compositions such as that published in "The Musical Times" in October, 1917. In it Harvey Grace welcomes the appearance of a new set of organ works by Saint-Saëns, but the inclusion of phrases such as "It is perhaps a pity that the composer takes such a long time reaching the Coda," and "It must be confessed, however, that the numerous pauses and changes to very slow time become irritating"[112] betray the critic's mixed feelings about the new compositions. Since "the privileging power of evaluative authority may be very great,"[113] these kinds of negative opinions can easily become the clichés of which Dahlhaus wrote, the scores for the music go out of print, and even those who have never seen the music assume it is unavailable because it was not very good to start with.

Smith states that the ability of a literary work (this applies as well to musical works) to endure is established as the result of numerous interrelating forces,

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[112]Harvey Grace, "Saint-Saëns's New Organ Works," *The Musical Times* LVIII/896 (Oct. 1, 1917): 44.

[113]Smith, 47.

which cannot be always easily identified or understood.[114] The first difficulty arises when we recognize that the "'features', 'qualities', and of course its 'meanings'--are not fixed, given, or inherent in the work 'itself,' but are at every point the variable products of particular *subjects*' interaction with it."[115] It follows that a particular work, or the works of a particular composer, may at one point in history have little meaning, relevance, or appeal for the concert-going public, with the opposite true at another time. This appears to have been the case with many of the works of J. S. Bach, which were considered academic and old-fashioned during his lifetime (Telemann being the more popular composer), but which have come to be considered some of the most important musical works of all time. Dahlhaus discusses this possibility in *Foundations of Music History*, where he writes that perhaps musical compositions proceed "from rudimentary and tentative beginnings toward what eighteenth-century philosophers of history called a *point de la perfection*" and cites as examples "the 1920's as being a *kairos* in the reception of Bruckner's symphonies, i.e. the point at which their 'time had come'; and it is not unthinkable that the years around 1970 might someday represent the high-water mark in the later history of Mahler's works."[116]

Another of Smith's points on the subject of endurance is worthy of note. She writes that a work which has at any time in history been granted canonical status

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[114]Ibid.

[115]Ibid., 48.

[116]Dahlhaus, 157.

has a great chance of retaining that status, even if conditions change which alter the acceptability of that work. For example, if the organ works of Franck were to lose their appeal, meaning, and relevance for the audiences of 1997, they would nevertheless retain their place in the canon. However, if the organ works of Saint-Saëns for whatever reasons came to be equal to the Franck works in terms of appeal, meaning, and relevance (if these could be measured), they would still be greatly disadvantaged relative to the Franck works. There are basically two reasons for this:

> For one thing, when the value of a work is seen as unquestionable, those of its features that would, in a noncanonical work, be found alienating--for example technically crude--will be glozed over or backgrounded.
>
> Second, [the accepted work] will also begin to perform certain characteristic cultural functions by virtue of the very fact that it *has* endured . . . and be valued and preserved accordingly . . . . Nothing endures like endurance.[117]

If Saint-Saëns' organ works do have the potential to appeal to today's audiences, proponents of them will have to work twice as hard to get them played, published, recorded, and listened to.

As we have seen, a variety of forces interacted to bring about this position of neglect. It cannot be claimed that any one of them--German nationalism, Saint-Saëns' conservative tastes or classical orientation, his abrasive personality, or suspicions about his ancestry--could account for the decline of his reputation and the lack of visibility of his organ music. Together, however, these elements provide

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[117]Smith, 49 and 50.

an example of the many factors that influence a composer's reputation and the contingency of (in this case musical) value that Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes.

The life and career of Camille Saint-Saëns was one characterized by irony. Although he worked hard to raise the standards of French music, what he considered to be his serious compositions have been largely forgotten and for a long time he was known simply as the composer of *The Wedding Cake Waltz.* In 1886 he composed *Le Carnaval des Animaux*, but except for *Le Cygne* refused to let it be published during his lifetime. This suite has gone on to become his most enduring work. During the latter part of the nineteenth century he worked toward the acceptance of French music by the French, only to be ostracized and even ridiculed by many of his fellow composers. With the present renewed interest in organ music from the nineteenth century, it is entirely possible that Saint-Saëns' works for this instrument may find their place as respected works of art for the first time in the twenty-first century, an irony which the composer surely would have appreciated.

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## Appendix

### The Solo Organ Works of Camille Saint-Saëns

Fantaisie (1857)

Élévation ou Communion, Opus 13 (c. 1856)

Bénédiction Nuptiale, Opus 9 (1859)

Trois Rhapsodies sur des Cantiques Bretons, Opus 7 (1866)

Trois Préludes et Fugues, Opus 99 (1894)

Fantasie, Opus 101 (1895)

Marche Religieuse, Opus 107 (1897)

Trois Préludes et Fugues, Opus 109 (1898)

Sept Improvisations, Opus 150 (1916 and 1917)

Fantaisie, Opus 157 (1919)